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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000244

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM TU

SUBJECT: WHAT'S TIED UP IN TURKEY'S HEADSCARF DEBATE?

REF: A. ANKARA 0171

1B. ANKARA 0165

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. In the second, final round of voting February 9, Turkey's parliament approved two constitutional amendments aimed at lifting the headscarf ban at universities. The amendments, addressing equality under the law and right to education, lay the groundwork for lifting the ban, though neither specifically mentions the headscarf. Those details will be the subject of the next round of debate, when parliament considers yet-to-be-proposed revisions to Article 17 of the Higher Education Board (YOK) Law. President Abdullah Gul is expected to sign the constitutional amendments into law this week; they will take effect upon publication in the Official Gazette. Behind the clear majority favoring lifting the ban at universities continues to rage a polarizing social debate over secularism, freedom of choice and the state of Turkey's democracy. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) As expected, Turkey's parliament approved amendments to Constitution Articles 10 (equality under the law) and 42 (right to education) in the second, final vote February 9 by a vote of 411 to 103. The amendments lay the groundwork for lifting the court-imposed headscarf ban at Turkey's universities. Deputies from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) joined forces to support the measure; MPs from the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Democratic Left Party (DSP) opposed. CHP and DSP are expected to apply to the Constitutional Court to annul the amendments. Neither amendment mentions the headscarf; those details, to be addressed in revisions to YOK Law Article 17, are likely to be the subject of continued heated debate.

All Tied Up in Knots

13. (C) The headscarf ban encapsulates a bitter fight between a swelling conservative Anatolian middle class, rapidly urbanizing and upwardly mobile, and a staunchly secular privileged elite fearful that growing conservatism and religiosity are gradually dismantling the Kemalist state. Under the rubric of rights and freedoms, both sides contend they are fighting to strengthen Turkey's democracy. Ban opponents decry the injustice of discriminating against covered women, whose options are drastically limited when the doors of academe slam shut. Supporters of the ban fear uncovered women will soon be pressured into wearing headscarves, not just at university but in other public

facilities, as greater religious freedom erodes the protections of a secular system. Aside from trying explicitly to circumscribe the current debate to the situation in universities, the government has done little to reassure skeptics that civil liberties granted to one group will not be allowed to erode those of others.

Pressure-cooker

¶4. (C) "Neighborhood pressure" -- the concept that widespread headscarf use will make uncovered women uncomfortable appearing in public without one -- remains a central concern of ban supporters. They argue that, once donned, the headscarf is socially very difficult to remove. The government's Directorate of Religious Affairs recently announced that the proposal to lift the ban comports with the Islamic "requirement" to cover one's head, adding to ban supporters' fears that the scope for freedom of lifestyle choice is narrowing under AKP's conservative rule.

¶5. (C) Pressure flows both ways. More than 3500 academics have signed a declaration of support for lifting the ban, a move that has generated intense criticism within their own circles. The statement urges universities to favor freedoms, not prohibitions, when fundamental human rights such as freedoms of thought, expression, religion, belief and education are at stake. "We believe that as in every country, the freedom to dress in whatever way a person desires should be given to all of our students without discrimination on the basis of religion, belief, thought, race, ethnic group or gender, and demand that all implementation to the contrary be halted at once." Professors Ihsan Dagi and Saban Calis, who posted the

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declaration February 1, acknowledged some academics "changed their minds" after endorsing the statement, possibly due to pressure from university officials or colleagues. Ali Nesin, a mathematics professor and son of writer and well-known critic of religious extremism Aziz Nesin (a survivor of a 1993 arson attack by religious extremists that killed 37), has been accused of betraying his father's name for signing the document. The Universities Council Association recently retaliated with a campaign against lifting the ban, reportedly collecting over 3000 signatures from academics.

Poll Shows Strong Support for Lifting the Ban

¶6. (SBU) A January telephone survey by Metropoll of 1245 men and women in 26 provinces (+/- 2.8 percent margin of error) showed almost 70 percent of women cover their heads; of those, 67 percent wear the traditional Turkish "headcovering" (scarf), while 27 percent wear the Islamic "turban" -- the style said to indicate religious conviction. The vast majority (about 80 percent) claim to cover of their own will and for reasons of faith; about 8 percent point to the demands of husband or family. Only 1-2 percent point to neighborhood pressure. The survey showed a virtually perfect correspondence between respondents with no covered members in their household and those who favor the ban (27.6 percent in each case). Roughly the same number worried that lifting the ban would result in pressure on uncovered students. Almost 65 percent of participants said students should be able to cover their heads at university; 47 percent said headscarves should be allowed even if worn as a political symbol. The poll reveals that even some of the large majority who want the ban lifted worry that doing so will lead to increased social tension, rather than tolerance. Approximately 15 percent of respondents claim their families are experiencing difficulties because of the ban. To the question, "Would you want your daughter to cover?" 55 percent responded affirmatively, 24 said no; only 18 percent replied that it should be the daughter's decision.

Education and Economic Independence Make the Difference

¶7. (C) Metropoll director Ozer Sencar told us conventional wisdom holding that the "turban" signals religious fervor is not true. Much more pertinent to the choice between turban and traditional headcovering, he says, are factors of social or economic status, education, environment, and age: for the younger, richer, and more upwardly mobile, the turban is more likely to be the covering of choice. Women under 40, even if they only have a high school education, do not like to "tie under the chin" (in the traditional Anatolian way). Sencar noted that the basis of the headscarf problem is freedom of individual choice. All authorities -- the state, judiciary, universities, and families -- impose their will on subordinates. According to Sencar, two factors are key for women's independent decision-making and social tolerance: education and economic independence.

¶8. (C) COMMENT. Although many Turks employ the rhetoric of rights and freedoms in the headscarf debate, it is a language they do not speak fluently. The battle has been framed variously as a fight for equal access to public services, equal access to education, freedom of expression and the preservation of secularism, with most avoiding the inflammatory freedom of religion or freedom of choice arguments. PM Erdogan recently told his parliamentary group, "Our only goal is to eliminate the victimization of our girls at universities." AKP and MHP leaders maintain the ban will only be lifted at universities, though how they will hold the line there is not clear. Ban supporters fail to acknowledge that their "freedom" denies others access to public services and compromises basic democratic principles. The government's short-sighted haste to score a popular victory and the secular establishment's reflexive hysteria rest on the undemocratic, paternalistic assumption that they can dictate style to their women. Easing the ban would be a positive step toward rectifying an injustice, but the approach chosen is flawed. END COMMENT.

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